

Empowering Multilingual Learners through Translingual and Transmodal Practices in Virtual Learning Spaces

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The rapid evolution of communication technologies, compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly expanded the utilization of virtual learning formats such as online, blended, and hybrid learning across various educational levels and settings. Nevertheless, the shift to virtual learning has presented challenges for many educators and students, particularly those lacking the experience (and desire) to teach and learn via this modality. For multilingual learners (MLs) who must navigate the virtual

learning environment in a new language, virtual learning can be particularly challenging when the learning process involves a significant amount of reading and writing tasks without learner support (Sailsman, 2020). Educators and researchers have raised concerns about MLs' experiences and comfort in using new apps, websites, and online resources in a second or additional language, as well as their ability to learn independently without personalized support (Rajendram et al., 2022; Robertson, 2020; Sailsman, 2020).

Despite these challenges, virtual learning also provides opportunities for educators to develop innovative and creative methods to engage MLs in learning. Maamuujav et al. (2019) argue that "the evolving landscape of contemporary literacy calls for educators to revamp their instructional practices and utilize digital tools in an effective and efficient manner to deliver lessons and support students' learning" (p. 2). In this article, I propose a translingual and transmodal approach (De Costa et al., 2017; Newfield, 2017) that stems from the theories of translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2020; Garcia & Otheguy, 2020; Li, 2022) and multimodality (Jewitt, 2006; Kress, 2010). Additionally, I share strategies that educators can employ to leverage virtual learning environments in designing instructional activities that are meaningful and equitable for MLs.



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WHO ARE MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS?

In the context of the United States, multilingual learners (MLs) are students who use a language other than English in school, at home, and/or in the community (Grapien et al. 2023; Ryu, 2019). MLs represent 10.3% of the students in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), and they are the fastest-growing population in the US. The National Education Association (2020) predicts that by 2025, 25% of the students will be MLs. The reality is that most U.S. instructors will likely have multilingual learners in their classrooms, regardless of the modality taught. Thus, acknowledging this reality, humanizing both the virtual and face-to-face learning environment in ways that honor and support MLs as an integral part of the instructional design becomes essential. Rosa and Flores (2023) argue from a raciolinguistic perspective that multilingualism is racialized. Raciolinguistic ideologies are rooted in the concept that race is a colonial and ontological issue, where an individual's language practices are categorized and labeled by their race before they even have a chance to express themselves. Consequently, multilingual white students are often commended for their language skills, while multilingual Black and Latinx students' language skills are viewed differently within the school system.

The promotion and enforcement of "standard" English in the formal school curriculum, which encompasses specific linguistic features connected to a particular race and social status, has become a means of systematically marginalizing and stigmatizing students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. When English-medium instruction and English as a second language (ESL) services at schools perceive MLs as "deficit learners" and seek to assist them in adapting to dominant language norms without recognizing their diverse and rich linguistic resources, the education system perpetuates systematic experiences of linguistic marginalization and discrimination. This racialized perspective is further amplified in science education, where only individuals with dominant language skills are seen as competent to partake in specialized discourse and practices (Grapien et al., 2023). As a consequence of systematic marginalization and exclusion, MLs are found to underperform in formal school settings, including virtual learning environments.

WHAT ARE TRANSLANGUAGING AND MULTIMODALITY?

In order to better support multilingual learners in schools, it is essential to address and teach both content and language learning in an integrated manner (Coyle, 2007; Roth et al., 2022). In that regard, the theories of translanguaging and multimodality highlight the importance of enhancing content and language-integrated learning by tapping into learners' existing knowledge, relating to their real-life experiences, drawing from their language and cultural backgrounds, and providing them with opportunities to use language through various modes of communication (body language, facial expression, visual etc.) (García, 2017; Kalantzis et al., 2010; Kress, 2010; Li, 2022). Translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2018; García, 2017; Li, 2022) is an educational approach and a linguistic practice that involves using multiple languages fluidly within the same activity or context to facilitate learning and communication. It is based on the understanding that bilingual and multilingual individuals do not keep their languages separate but rather use them in an integrated manner to make sense of their world. Multimodality (Kalantzis et al., 2010; Kress, 2010) refers to the use and integration of multiple modes or channels of communication and expression within a given context. In essence, it recognizes that meaning can be conveyed through a combination of different types of resources, not just through written or spoken language alone.

Through translanguaging and multimodality, educators would move away from a racialized view of multilingual learners. Instead, they would create opportunities and space for students to engage in creative expression by honoring and incorporating their diverse multilingual and multimodal linguistic resources, i.e., their home language, everyday language, and non-verbal forms of communication such as drawings and body language. (Calderón et al., 2011; Cummins, 2009; Li, 2022)

THE TRANSLINGUAL AND TRANSMODAL APPROACH

Aligning with the translanguaging and multimodality perspectives, I emphasize the intentional design for "translingual practices" (Canagarajah, 2018, 2020; De Costa et al., 2017) and "transmodal moments" (Curiel & Palmer, 2023; Newfield, 2017). The transduction of meaning

(Kress, 2010) is the space where learning can be enhanced, and students can be empowered through their creative design of meaning (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2022; Prain & Tytler, 2022). The prefix “trans” in “translingual” and “transmodal” signifies that instead of simply encouraging and describing how learners create meanings multilingually and multimodally, we should engage learners in consciously transforming and transducing meanings from one **communicative mode** to another. For example, students might turn visual representations into a written essay mixing colloquial English and Spanish or transform an oral explanatory account into a performance with bodily movements through dramatic play. They might also work to turn informal conversations in Spanish into academic writing in English or a mixture of Spanish and English. In essence, a translingual and transmodal approach focuses on how learners integrate and transduce meanings across communicative modes (written and spoken language, visuals, gestures, objects, etc.) within and across sign systems.

FOSTERING TRANSLINGUAL AND TRANSMODAL PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL LEARNING SPACES

Virtual communication and learning encompass a diverse array of modes and literacies, enhancing translingual and transmodal practices. Within virtual communities, individuals frequently engage in communication using a combination of modes inherent in the digital age, including images, videos, sounds, emojis, GIFs, clipart, and multilingual text. Multimodal virtual learning tools such as Flipgrid, Google Drawings, Animaker, Pixton, Canva, and Co-Space empower learners to creatively express meaning through multiple modes, moving beyond text-only communication. In the realm of STEM subjects, virtual reality platforms like PhET, Inspirit, VictoryXR, and Futuclass provide web-based and/or headset-based simulations, aiding in the visualization of concepts and facilitating multimodal meaning-making. Despite offering solely web-based interactive simulations, PhET (see <https://phet.colorado.edu/>) is widely utilized by science and math educators and represents a robust virtual learning tool with simulations available in numerous languages.

To effectively use these multimodal virtual learning tools to support MLs, teachers should

consider the following ideological and design considerations:

1. **Design:** The design of the virtual activities needs to reposition MLs from the periphery to the center and lessen the divide between school-based language and MLs’ out-of-school language practices.
2. **Integration:** The integration of multimodal learning tools should aim to enhance the affirmation of MLs’ lived experience, knowledge, and diverse language practices in certain ways.
3. **Implementation:** The activities should be designed to support and engage students, both MLs and English monolingual learners, in transducing meanings across modes of communication and being each other’s tutors during the translingual and transmodal processes.

Examples of designing, integrating, and implementing multimodal virtual resources for translingual and transmodal practices in virtual space. One example of meaningful virtual instructional activities aligning with the translingual and transmodal approach is to involve students in the creation of **digital identity texts** (Cummins et al., 2015). For instance, in language arts (Rajendram et al., 2022), educators can introduce George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From” (1999). They can encourage students to reinterpret the poem in various forms of expression, such as drawings or animation, to demonstrate their understanding. During discussions about the poem, teachers can facilitate a video-based dialogue using Flipgrid, allowing students to explore and share their backgrounds, homes, family upbringing, values, languages, cultures, and other significant memories. Students should then be prompted to create their own “Where I Am From” poem in a multimodal format, such as video, comics, or a podcast, that enables the use of multiple modes and languages. Lastly, to highlight translingual and transmodal meaning-making, students can be paired up to compare their multimodal representations and reflect on how different linguistic resources were used creatively in each other’s work.

Similarly, in science education, teachers can spark learner curiosity and anchor understanding by introducing a scientific phenomenon relevant to the students’ lived experiences. For example, in a water cycle unit (University of California-Santa

Barbara, 2024), online teachers may prepare a lesson using the online, interactive presentation tool, NearPod (<https://nearpod.com/>). In this lesson, students first watch a video showing how water moves in local streams and reservoirs. Students then draw a simple diagram of the water cycle in NearPod, and the teacher facilitates sharing and comparing the models. Next, students find an indoor plant at home, put it in a plastic bag, place it outside in the sun for a while, and observe the precipitation. After this observation, students can use PhET to conduct a water cycle virtual simulation. They then revisit their models and create a more detailed version in a different mode (e.g., a video dramatization of the water cycle and a Pixton comic strip). Throughout the process, students should be encouraged to use any verbal and non-verbal resources to express themselves and be scaffolded to transform their multimodal representations into verbal model-based explanations.

CONCLUSION

The tips and examples above serve as a starting point to humanize virtual learning as an inclusive space for MLs and English monolingual learners alike. A translingual and transmodal approach fosters a more equitable learning environment for MLs while offering profuse learning benefits to both MLs and EMLs, not just MLs alone. Through this practical piece, I hope our field and educators will see the value of such an approach and embrace it for all learners.

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